

Civil War Book Review

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The Soldier's Pen: Firsthand Impressions of the Civil War

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Review

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Bonner, Robert E. *The Soldier's Pen: Firsthand Impressions of the Civil War*. Hill and Wang, \$26.00 hardcover ISBN 9780809087448

Common Soldiers' Understanding of the Civil War

This new work by Robert E. Bonner, the author of several previous books on the Civil War, including an excellent analysis of the Confederacy's flags, draws on the magnificent holdings of the Gilder Lehrman Collection at the New-York Historical Society to provide an overview of the experiences of the conflict's common soldiers that is both vivid and thoughtful. The author focuses on the experiences of sixteen Civil War veterans, both northern and southern, whose selected (and previously unpublished) letters, journals, and sketches he fleshes out with insightful analysis and commentary. His focus on the experiences and feelings of ordinary individuals caught up in the vast upheaval is useful, as is his thematic organization, with each chapter exploring a different issue.

Bonner contemplates and speculates on the meaning and purpose of wartime correspondence itself for these soldiers. Why did they write letters, and what constraints did they face in doing so? Mail itself was a vital, irreplaceable way of maintaining relationships and morale. While there was little if any actual censorship by the authorities, soldiers were much more likely to censor themselves rather than offend the sensibilities of those to whom they wrote, or risk portraying themselves in a negative light. Bonner also notes the sometimes humorous, sometimes grim way that soldiers made sense of camp life, suffering at times inconceivable hardships, annoyances, tyranny, and boredom. The hilarious and expressive sketches of the Massachusetts private George are a real find and in themselves probably more than justify this volume's existence.

The soldiers' letters also detail the horror and destruction of combat. These articulate and often blunt correspondents nevertheless struggled to express this

shattering, overwhelming experience in mere words. The passage of time, Bonner notes, made it much more possible for soldiers to contextualize their personal combat experiences, as they slowly gained a clearer, fuller understanding of the nature and significance of the battles and campaigns which they saw and experienced in such a narrow, personal way. The more time brought perspective, the more it made memories fuzzier and more sanitized, of course. While letters dealing with camp life often included heavy doses of humor, Bonner notes that correspondence relating combat experiences understandably featured far less in the way of levity. Some soldiers turned to religion to help themselves deal with the impact of the bloodshed, while others, as Bonner notes, became hardened and found satisfaction and a sense of increased security in the act of killing itself.

The author also demonstrates how political disaffection and frustration with at times poor leadership on both sides damaged morale in the ranks. Ultimately intense patriotism and dedication to the cause held the day on both sides, however, at least until the near-certainty of Confederate defeat during the war's final months caused the near-disintegration of the Southern armies. As the weary survivors returned home, they struggled and sometimes failed to pick up the lives and relationships they had left behind when they entered the service, which in some cases letters and occasional visits home were unable to sustain. The experiences of Union officer William Brunt and his much younger and unfaithful wife Olive, as detailed in this volume, are particularly sad and suggestive as to the manner in which these Victorian Americans struggled to uphold expected gender and family roles under intensely difficult circumstances.

In a potent, contemplative final chapter, Bonner discusses how the letters on which he bases this book itself became relics with intense meaning to these soldiers and their families. While this personal meaning has tended to diminish with time as the veterans and their loved ones have passed away, these letters continue to have an awesome power, both moving and illuminating, with which no other types of sources can compete. The author and the Gilder Lehrman Collection deserve thanks for bringing these hitherto essentially unknown sources to our attention, and for doing so much to make them accessible. Add this book to your Civil War bookshelf.

Michl T. Smith is assistant professor of history at McNeese State University. He is the author of A Traitor and a Scoundrel: Benjamin Hedrick and the Cost of Dissent (University of Delaware Press).

